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News Coverage of
American Political Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Since the classic Columbia University studies conducted in the 1940s, the role of the mass media in modern American politics has been the subject of debate among political scientists.

This paper contributes to that debate by examining news media coverage of American national political institutions - the presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court. A content analysis is employed to offer a descriptive portrayal of news coverage of these political institutions.

The conclusion was made that much of the news content is directly or indirectly related to the president - his actions, decisions, and policy initiatives. Public policy discussion dominated the news content, though varied in level of intensity across the three institutions.

The divergences in the news portrayal across institutions continued in emphasis on conflict in the story and a supposed tendency to personalize national government news.

Generalizations about news coverage about national government must be qualified by the nature of the institution and the nature of the medium.

Since the classic Columbia University studies conducted in the 1940s, the role of the mass media in American politics has become a prominent theme of scholarly debate. The major orientation of this debate has been the question of media effects. The result has been a scarcity of studies of the other elements of the mass communication process, namely the message itself and the antecedents of the message.

Studies describing the message or news content have become more frequent of late. News media coverage of national crises such as the Kennedy assassination, Watergate, and Three Mile Island have been the object of descriptive studies. Similarly, several studies have analyzed foreign affairs-related news coverage.¹

Increasing interest also has been indicated in description of news coverage of American national government. Grossman and Kumar's analysis of news content of the White House over a twenty-five year period explored questions of shifts of frequency of coverage for each administration, as well as the favorableness of news content, the primary actor or actors in news stories (president, president and Congress, White House staff, etc.), and the subject of the content (policy, personal, activity, etc.).² However, Grossman and Kumar admit their analysis is not a "definitive portrait" of the news media coverage of the presidency. Questions remain concerning the type of policy included in stories of the presidency, the depth of policy discussion, the role of Congress as a secondary actor, and the nature of stories about personalities, particularly the person of the president. Additionally, has the nature of news coverage been altered during the Carter and Reagan presidencies? A follow-up extending beyond research which ends in the late 1970s would respond to that question.

Descriptions of news media content about Congress have been infrequent. Wilhoit and Sherrill examined wire service coverage of U.S. senators finding the most visible senators were those with seniority and who possessed resource advantages such as large staff and a populous home state constituency.³ However, a similar study of newsmagazine coverage suggested senatorial activity, not power positions or resources, was the major predictor of news coverage.⁴

Studies of news coverage of Congress have not exhibited a consistency in findings. Robinson and Appel concluded that news coverage of Congress is primarily institutional, not individual, coverage.⁵ However, that conclusion was not confirmed subsequently.⁶ Shifting to the nature of coverage of the institution, in both newspaper and television coverage, committee stories have been found to outnumber other types of Congress stories.⁷ However, Hess reached a starkly different conclusion - newspaper coverage was weighted toward committee or subcommittee action while television network news strongly emphasized floor action.⁸ Findings also have differed on the coverage of the House versus the Senate. In their study of television network stories, Robinson and Appel concluded Senate coverage exceeded House coverage by two to one.⁹ However, Tidmarch and Pitney's analysis of newspaper coverage of the two bodies found a rough equivalence.¹⁰ Agreement was reached on the general negative direction of Congress coverage by the press.

The current literature leaves large gaps in our understanding of the news media portrayal of Congress. Is news content about Congress institutional or individual in nature? Are actions of committees or subcommittees more frequent than floor debates and actions? Does the content indicate a slighting of one house or the other? Returning to the individual-oriented

studies, what types of individuals get more coverage? To what extent are party leaders included in the news portrayal and what is the nature of that coverage? Still other questions not touched on by these prior studies concern the president's role in the portrayal of Congress and the amount and type of policy discussed in stories of Congress.

One study of television coverage of Congress indicated a massive decline recently in the number of Congress stories. Ornstein and Robinson found that network stories of Congress in September 1985 constituted less than half the amount during the same month in 1975.¹¹ Is this decline perhaps a television news phenomena or has Congress coverage really declined in the print media as well?

There has been little scholarly interest in describing content of news about the Supreme Court. However, the few studies of news media portrayal of the court have reached agreement that coverage of the court by the press is infrequent and sketchy. Leslie's multi-media content analysis concluded that news content of the court was largely descriptive with little analysis of political or social implications of court decisions.¹² Ericson's analysis of newspaper content found that an elite newspaper (the New York Times) reported on most court decisions while the non-elite daily press ignored or barely mentioned most of the court decisions. Stories about decisions rarely included explanation of the decision, the decision's context, the impact of the decision, and reaction by affected groups or individuals.¹³ Solimine's analysis of newsmagazine content indicated that only a fraction of the court's decisions were covered. Many of those decisions reported in the content involved freedom of the press issues.¹⁴

A large body of questions about news media coverage of the Supreme Court remain after a review of this literature. How frequent or infrequent are court stories? Has the press maximized or minimized its coverage during the Burger Court years? What does the news content say about the justices? What types of decisions are prominent in the news content?

Not all of the preceding inquiries can be addressed in a single paper. However, the objective of this paper is to address a portion of them. In addition, comparison will be made with expectations of the nature of news content. These expectations concern aspects of news content such as coverage of public policy, persons, and conflict.

Previous news content studies have concluded that policy coverage is overshadowed by preoccupation with non-policy - the unusual, the odd, the unexpected. These include emphasis on themes such as scandals, policymakers' gaffes, and human interest.

News coverage of electoral campaigns has been found to emphasize non-policy themes.¹⁵ Robinson and Sheehan noted that in 1980 on CBS Evening News and UPI wire service stories, the Billy Carter-Libya scandal merited seven times as much coverage as stories about the SALT II treaty.¹⁶ However, campaign news coverage during electoral periods may contaminate coverage of policy. The extent of attention to policy in coverage of national political institutions specifically remains an open question which will be addressed in this paper.

Coverage of persons was alluded to in the review of literature concerning news coverage of the presidency and Congress. The query will be extended to the Supreme Court as well.

Thirdly, is there a difference in the portrayal of conflict? V.O. Key's assessment was that "conflict, to judge from the headlines, is the entirety of politics."¹⁷ Conflict has been found to be a dominant theme in news content

in a variety of settings.¹⁸ Is conflict a predominant theme in news coverage of national political institutions?

Methodology

A content analysis of news content was utilized to examine news coverage of national political institutions. Through simple random sampling and stratified sampling, 672 news stories from three news mediums - CBS Evening News, the Los Angeles Times, and the Syracuse (New York) Post-Standard - were selected and coded. The sample drew from weekday evening news programs and daily newspaper issues over period of time extending from 1969 to 1983 with federal election years omitted. The intent of the study was to isolate "normal" years unaffected by the forces of electoral periods and the accompanying news media campaign coverage.

The Presidency and Congress

The presidency dominated the news coverage of national governmental institutions. Over one-half of the stories in this study concentrated on the presidency as the primary institution of the story. Only slightly more than one-third of the stories sampled reported on Congress primarily. (See Table 1) The presidency also was treated as the dominant partner in the relationship with Congress. As evidence, the presidency stories not only far outnumbered the stories about Congress, but the presidency also loomed large in stories where it was not the primary institution of the story. Two-thirds of the stories about Congress usually included the presidency as a secondary institution. When the positions were reversed, however, mention of Congress was made in only one of three stories of the presidency. In most stories where the presidency was the center of attention, there was no peripheral coverage of Congress as well. Congress, then, was viewed not as a separate branch, but one that was important due to its relationship to the presidency. The presidency, however, was treated as an institution largely independent from the actions of Congress.

This dominance of the presidency has not been a static phenomena, but one subject to gradual evolution since the late 1960s. Previous studies have indicated a gradual shift of news media coverage toward the presidency.¹⁹ Balutis determined the press had turned increasing attention to the presidency during the 1960s and early 1970s.²⁰ According to Table 2, the frequency of presidency stories rose steadily during the period under study. Over time, the presidency took a larger share of the media's attention while Congressional coverage declined dramatically. The two institutions appeared to have begun this period with roughly equal media attention as measured by the number of stories. However, by 1983 the gap in coverage between the two institutions had grown enormously. The real change occurred in Congress, not the presidency. The number of stories concerning Congress was halved during this period. However, the presidency did receive increased attention. The frequency of presidency stories rose by nearly one-third.

Like the Cheshire cat who vanished in front of Alice, except for his grin, Congress may have performed a disappearing act in front of the American public between 1969 and 1983. During this period, stories about Congress gradually decreased. As Table 3-3 indicates, Congress stories enjoyed a rough numerical parity with presidency stories during the years 1969 and 1971. The stimulus for increased share of the news media's portrayal devoted to prresidency

coverage is discussed in the previous chapter. However, Congressional coverage fell in absolute terms, as well, with less than half as many stories of Congress included in 1983 than in 1969. The total number of institutional stories in 1983 closely matched the 1969 figure, indicating that the press were not merely deleting national government stories with the Congress receiving the brunt of those cuts. Rather, the presidency and the Supreme Court gained news media notice at the expense of Congress.

Overall, there were 228 stories of Congress, which constituted slightly more than one out of three stories about national government. However, sixty-three percent or 144 stories occurred in the first half of the period under study.

The decline in Congressional coverage cannot be attributed largely to either house. As Table 3 suggests, both the Senate and the House of Representatives have experienced peaks and valleys. The movement in frequency of coverage likely corresponds to current roles of the two bodies. The Senate has been accorded the privilege of greater news media visibility due to its smaller size and its widely perceived function as a presidential candidate incubator. The fruits of this assumed privilege are evidenced by the Senate's greater visibility during this period. More than half of the stories of Congress were Senate stories while slightly more than one-third were House stories. The remainder were either about both or did not distinguish between the houses, but spoke only of "Congress." However, the Senate has at times been eclipsed by the House. The Senate played the major role in opposition to the Vietnam War and the presidency generally during 1969-1973. The House of Representatives came to the fore in 1975, perhaps in response to a variety of factors - the occupancy of the presidential chair by a former member of the House, the role of the House Judiciary Committee in the Watergate investigation, and the large group of reform-minded liberal Democrats elected to the House in 1974 who provided a more effective counterpoint to the conservative Republican president.

As an aside, it should be noted that the House produced its most serious recent presidential candidate in 1976, Morris Udall, which may have been related to increased news emphasis on the House.

The subject of Eric Severeid's CBS commentary on February 25, 1975, pointed to the viability of the third factor:

"Something happened in that November election with the large contingent of fresh, young minds of both sexes whom the voters sent to Congress. This contingent has a certain collective personality. They seem to be both tough-minded and high-minded, undogmatic, more anxious to do something than just to be something, willing to experiment, more result-minded than cause-minded. It was as if by some saving instinct, voters knew that unprecedented problems require a break with the precedent in the kind of people who must deal with the problems."

The Senate returned to news media prominence during the remainder of the decade, during a Democratic presidency. In 1981 the newly Republican Senate perpetuated that dominance.

However, the House clearly became the focal point of news coverage in 1983. With an enlarged Democratic contingent and flagging support for the Reagan administration and the Republican Senate, the House served as the counterpoint to the presidency. But, the drastic reduction of Congressional

coverage did not make the House in 1983 the counterweight the Senate had been in 1969 -73.

The Congress not only became less visible but it also had to share the coverage it received with the presidency. As discussed earlier, stories about Congress usually included discussions of the presidency as a secondary institution. CBS stories of Congress were slightly more likely to make reference to the presidency than were print media stories. The stories of the House were more likely to include the presidency. Sixty-nine percent of House stories made some reference to the presidency. The Senate appeared more newsworthy on its own merits. Fifty-six percent of Senate stories also mentioned the presidency. As Table 4-2 demonstrates, the presidency loomed largest during inaugural years - 1969, 1973, 1977, and 1981. Even during off-years - 1971, 1979, and 1983 - Congress stories usually were overshadowed by the presidency. (1975 was part off-year and part inaugural year due to the Ford presidency.)

In the news content, Congress was treated largely as a reactive body to the president - approving or rejecting presidential policy. One CBS story: "The Battle of the Budget came to a showdown in the Senate today. It came over President Nixon's veto of a vocational rehabilitation bill as too costly. The Senate originally passed that measure 86 to 2, but Mr. Nixon won the showdown." (April 3, 1973). "The House Banking Committee Thursday angered President Nixon... by approving retroactive payment of most previously negotiated wage increases stymied by the wage freeze." (Post Standard November 5, 1971). "While the Reagan administration lost one policy fight in the Supreme Court today, the President won a major round on another policy fight in Congress tonight. Phil Jones reports the Democratic controlled House defied its own leadership and voted to unfreeze hundreds of millions of dollars for the MX missile." (CBS, May 24, 1983). Much of the context of these stories concerned Congressional action or reaction towards presidential proposals such as Carter's energy program, Nixon's Anti-Ballistic Missile plan, and Reagan's budget and tax cut initiatives. The press chose those Congressional actions as more newsworthy than action on policy which was not high priority for the president.

Also, Presidential initiatives composed a much larger share of Congressional stories in the latter years, 1981 and 1983, than in 1969 and 1971. Most of the Congressional stories on CBS during the first two years of the study featured Congressional initiatives such as Senator Michael Mansfield's proposal to limit U.S. troop deployment in Europe, Sen. Pastore's war on television violence, and several Congressional proposals to limit U.S. military involvement in Indochina. Also, more stories dealt with the oversight function of Congress. By contrast, in 1981 and 1983, only one Congressional story on CBS - a Senate bill to reinstate the draft - highlighted a Congressional initiative.

Over time, Congress not only became less visible and forced to share its news attention with the presidency, but more frequently the Congress entered the portrayal only in conjunction with the president's policy agenda.

Frequency of stories is one means for measuring emphasis in media content. Another is the prioritizing process for stories. Stories about the presidency not only appeared with greater frequency, but they also garnered slightly higher priority in news coverage. In the print media, for example, presidency stories were more often to be found on the top of the front page than Congress stories. Nearly two-thirds of presidency stories were placed on the top half of the page, while only one of every two Congress stories appeared in the same

favorable position. A reader was more likely to see stories about the presidency first and in bolder top-of-the-page headlines.

Also, by a slight margin, presidency stories were more likely to be placed higher in the newspaper than stories about Congress. They were present more frequently in the first five pages than stories about Congress. However, presidency stories did not receive similar priority in the broadcast media.

The Special Case of the Supreme Court

For many people the Supreme Court appears to function behind a shroud of formality and secrecy. The news media's portrayal of the court perpetuates that view. News media images are of a Supreme Court preoccupied with legal matters and largely uninterested in politics.

The shroud of secrecy surrounding the court and its activities is reinforced by the infrequent nature of newspaper and television stories about the court. Coverage of the Supreme Court constituted only eight percent of the national governmental coverage - less than one-fourth the number of stories about Congress and less than one-seventh the number of presidency stories. CBS devoted the least attention to the court, providing less than four percent of their stories for coverage of the court. By contrast, eight percent of the Post-Standard stories and one of ten Times stories dealt with the court.

The gap between the frequency of coverage of the court and that of the presidency and Congress may be a function of the court's failure to provide visible news stories on a continual basis. Moreover, the court consciously has adopted a more aloof posture toward the press than the presidency or Congress. The court's decisions are not "handed down" daily (with the possible exception of the final few weeks of the term). Justices rarely provide interview opportunities and do so usually on "background."¹

Though the decision-making process is an ongoing one, the process is enacted beyond the view even of reporters assigned to the court. When reporters occasionally penetrate the shield of secrecy of the court, as one ABC News reporter did in 1979, the court responds by tightening security and further limiting access for the press.² Consequently, on most days the court is not producing news and makes no effort to meet a reporter's need for a story.

Infrequency of court coverage may also be attributed to the court's distance from the conflictual relationship between the Congress and the presidency. Though the court plays an increasing role in policy formulation and implementation, the court reacts usually long after the president, Congress, and journalists have dropped the issue. The court is not usually portrayed as part of a triangular conflictual relationship in national government.

However, somewhat akin to the slogan of E.F. Hutton, when the court speaks, the news media listen. Stories about the court, when they appear, tend to be given priority. In the Post-Standard and the Times, two of three stories about the court on the front page were displayed on the top of the page - the most important location for news stories.

Supreme Court stories also possessed a "stand alone" quality shared by the presidency, but not Congress. In more than three-fourths of the court stories, neither the presidency nor Congress was even mentioned. Conversely, the court is rarely included in stories of Congress or the presidency. Again, the court is usually not portrayed as in a relationship with the other two

institutions. The court primarily is disassociated from the activities of the other two institutions in the media's portrayal.

Though Supreme Court stories constituted only eight percent of the national government coverage during this period 1969-1983, that average masks a trend toward increased attention to the court. As Table 3-3 suggests, the number of stories about the court rose during this period. In relative terms, by 1983 the court stories accounted for nearly 15 percent of all stories while the Congress stories composed only 23 percent. That figure is indicative of both an increase in the frequency of court stories and a decrease in the frequency of Congress stories, but nevertheless suggests enlarged court role in the media's portrayal of national government. Heightened interest in the court by the news media and the potential impact on the court's behavior ought to be a subject of interest to scholars of the court.

Covering Public Policy

Significant differences were found to exist across institutions in coverage of policy and non-policy matters. As Table 4 shows, the Supreme Court stories possessed high levels of policy discussion in contrast with the Congress and the presidency. The Congress and the presidency stories also varied in degree of policy content. (The two variables - policy and non-policy - were not designed to be strictly dichotomous. A policy story could contain significant levels of non-policy and vice versa.) Non-policy content also varied by institution. (See Table 5) Again, the court content included little non-policy while a slight majority of the presidency stories contained at least some amounts of non-policy content. Even in the presidency stories, levels of policy content exceeded those of non-policy.

The stories of the court are stories of the decisions of the court, which only infrequently relate to topics other than public policy. What non-policy existed in the content can be attributed mainly to stories of the rare turnover of justices on the court.

This conclusion of preponderance of policy interest varies sharply from earlier studies of news media coverage of the presidential campaign where the news media were found to emphasize non-policy matters in their campaign coverage. However, there is a distinction between the campaign trail and the White House. In a campaign, at least two candidates are stumping the nation, issuing claims and promises, hurling charges at each other, and pursuing electoral strategies to win votes. In such a situation, the press may feel more of an obligation to reject the candidate's agenda as campaign rhetoric and attempt to set their own agenda for the campaign. The trappings of the White House, the power of the presidency, the aura of the office, and the absence of a highly visible single opponent may influence reporters to accept the institution's agenda more readily than in the campaign. When the president speaks, reporters understand the power of the presidency and the potential import of presidential statements. Moreover, when the president speaks, it is in response to specific problems confronting the federal government. Such statements exist within a context of events and actions related to policy formulation and implementation. However, campaign-related statements lack that contextual component.

Like coverage of the presidency, the news media's portrayal of Congress was found to be strongly policy-oriented. Two-thirds of the Congress stories contained high policy content. One in four stories excluded any reference to policy. The content of such stories is indicated by the following headlines:

81 in House Still Paid for Work as Lawyers

Filibuster Foes Set Back by Mistake of Rockefeller

Zorinsky Says Republicans Didn't Want Him in Fold

Heinz 'Idiot,' Weicker Says in Debate

This type of story, coupled with stories of Congressional inefficiency and deadlock on policy may contribute to a generally negative image of Congress in the press. One study concluded that most newspaper editorials on Congress were neutral, but the negative editorials outnumbered the positive by ten to one.²² CBS content gave the most attention to non-policy. Non-policy content on CBS News appeared at higher levels than in the content of the print media. Broadcast news may face a more difficult task explaining policy given their time limitations and visual needs. More attention appears to be devoted to more easily explainable non-policy topics or non-policy aspects of policy stories.

Policy may attain high levels in the content due to some hidden variables not included in this study. Policy also may be present on its own merits. Policy content is "hard" news. Policy matters are what these institutions do. Policy is the stuff of the work of these institutions and the majority of the news content reflected that policy emphasis.

However, omitted from this study is analysis of the nature of that policy content. Frequency and intensity do not answer questions internal to the policy content. How informative of policy issues are these stories? How much of these stories emphasizes the fate of policy rather than explanation of policy alternatives and implications? When policy alternatives are present, how are they framed in the content?

Another complication is the performance of CBS News in coverage of policy. CBS policy content, compared with the print mediums, was more sparse. While half of the print media stories contained high policy levels, less than a third of CBS stories did so. Also, high policy stories did not receive priority in the CBS story placement. The higher the policy level of the story, the less likely the story was found in the first five stories of the evening news broadcast. This disparity between print and broadcast mediums is only the first of several which will become apparent. The three mediums contrasted on the levels of non-policy content. CBS content possessed more non-policy stories and at slightly higher levels than the print mediums. Also, CBS content gave slight priority in story placement to non-policy stories, while the Times and the Post-Standard did not.

Personalizing Stories

When news stories featured persons, the subject was the presidency. (See Table 5) The presidency, with a vertical organizational structure headed by a single executive, is conducive to a person-orientation, it can be argued. However, it should be remembered that for the purpose of this study the bureaucracy was considered part of the presidency.

The Congress, on the other hand, with 535 members, separate chambers, and numerous committees and subcommittees, as an institution would be expected to overshadow individuals in the news coverage, which it did. Members competing with each other for news attention were rarely rewarded with the featured attention in a story many might wish to have had. Their statements or actions, when included, were often contrasted with those of other members or the president. Their behavior was treated as part of the whole.

Yet, the Senate has been termed a "presidential incubator."⁴ This recently acquired role is one indication of the news media's ability to help further individual members' goals separate from the institution or the party. The promotion of individualism has been the subject of others' work. According to one study, activist senators were found to receive more news media attention even than senators at the peak of the opportunity or power structure in the Congress.⁵ Michael J. Robinson concluded that press relations now favor the individual at the expense of the institution of Congress. However, news media coverage also has been characterized as largely institutional in nature.⁶

Congressional stories, however, in these three media were found to be stories about the institution or one of the houses of Congress and not primarily stories about individual members. Only twenty-three percent of Congress stories featured individuals. Senate stories were significantly more individual-oriented than House stories. Members of the Senate did receive more coverage than their counterparts in the House. But even in the highly individualistic Senate, more than two-thirds of the stories focused on the institution.

The highly institutional nature of news coverage of the Congress may be a product of the news media's limitations on time and space. While concentrating on the president, the press can cover events, meet time/space imperatives, and offer individual-oriented stories due to the unity of the office in one person. In Congress, however, description and discussion of one person's activities, actions, or statements fails to encompass the whole activity of the institution. Elite newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times can provide supplemental stories on individuals due to greater allocation of resources in coverage of Congress and national news coverage generally. In fact, the Times did carry a slightly higher proportion of stories of persons than the Post-Standard or CBS News. Nevertheless, these stories served as additions to the main news stories, most of which did not feature individual persons.

The Supreme Court, however, is a body including only nine members. Person stories would be expected to occur frequently due to the potentially significant impact of a single individual in the court's behavior. However, the justices were rarely direct objects of news media attention. The news stories of the court were almost never about the persons on the court, in sharp contrast to the stories of the presidency. Court stories stressed the institution with the justices as parts of the whole, but not covered as individuals. Those very few stories in the sample about justices as individuals consisted primarily of features on nominees for the bench moving

through the confirmation process - specifically John Paul Stevens and Clement Haynsworth - and one justice who resigned, Potter Stewart.

The justices' relative invisibility to the press, separate from the institution, is a court-initiated phenomena. Justices have chosen to avoid the public spotlight. Though a few of the justices have made tentative steps toward the press, the norm of aloofness has not yet been significantly altered.

The news coverage was found to be personalized, but primarily around the person of the president. The president was the major individual player in the news coverage of national government. No other individual secured the news media's interest and continuous attention as did the president. Similarly, Grossman and Kumar found that rarely did an issue of the New York Times or Time magazine or a broadcast of CBS Evening News omit a story about the White House. And "the White House story is the president: who he is, what he does, and what his programs, actions, and goals are."² More than six of ten person stories about the presidency in this sample were about a single person - the president.

The president is a major player of many of the stories of the presidency not primarily about the president. No other policymaker within the executive branch was accorded as much time and space as the president. In other words, according to this measure of news attention, all other policymakers in the presidency combined received less attention in the news content than the president alone.

Conflict

Conflict was not a major theme of stories of the presidency. Nearly four of ten stories of the presidency contained no conflict. Moreover, presidency stories possessed significantly lower levels of conflict, when present, than the Congress or court stories. Given the hierarchical nature of the presidency, conflict may be more covert in the presidency and more difficult for reporters to incorporate in stories. Additionally, many of the presidency stories featured the president or another top official making statements without challenge by either members of Congress or other policymakers of the executive branch.

Conflict was not a predominant theme in news media content about the Supreme Court. Conflict occurred in court stories, but at lower levels than in stories of Congress. The disparate emphasis of conflict in court stories and stories of Congress reinforces the thesis that the nature of the institution is an intervening variable in the formulation of the news product. Most conflict on the court is removed from the public view. It takes place in the conference room, which is closed to the press. One indication of the closed nature of that process is the explanation by Chief Justice Burger on the announcement of his resignation of the type of debate engaged in during the conferences.³ The final products of the court - particularly the majority opinions - often represent compromises to obtain a majority or to augment a narrow majority. The remaining conflict - the visible conflict which appears through the various written opinions - is conflict over policy, not personal or partisan. Additionally, such conflict does not have a visual component through interpersonal, verbal expression, but through written statements. For television news especially, the absence of that component magnifies the problem of expressing conflict in the court's activities.

Moreover, the written conflict, when it exists, is often subdued through expression in the form of complex legal arguments unfamiliar to the mass public.

Stories of Congress were found to be heavily conflict-laden. Only one in eight Congress stories contained no mention of conflict while more than half had medium to high levels of conflict. The propensity to cover conflict was strongest on the part of CBS News. Four of ten Congress stories on CBS News were high conflict stories. By contrast, only one in four Times stories and one in five Post-Standard stories included such levels of conflict content. The variation in the amount of conflict may suggest significant variation in the use of conflict as a news value in the broadcast media versus the print media. Comstock has proposed segregated treatment of television as a medium due to its intensification of the characteristics of the mass media.** These findings lend credence to Comstock's theory. Television with its rapidity and transiency may constrain the broadcast media to heighten the role of conflict in the newsgathering process to attract audiences. The framing of Congress stories as conflict relationships may simplify the story presentation for broadcast journalism.

Emphasis on conflict by the press may also be affected by the nature of Congress itself. Conflict in Congress is readily observable, even to the casual observer. The representation of diverse interests produces visible conflict manifested in the committee hearings and floor debates, as well as during news conferences of members. The search for such conflict on the part of the press is not lengthy nor difficult. Cooperation among members, though a significant aspect of the institution, may well be a less visible enterprise engaged in during private meetings and cloakroom conversations.

The nature of the institution again appeared significant. Conflict was not significant in the content related to the presidency. Conflict was significant in the Congress and, to a lesser extent, the court, where it is a more visible trait as policymakers in these institutions deal with policy.

Conflict varied across mediums. CBS News content contained significantly higher levels of conflict content. Conflict coverage was found to have increased during the period under study. As Table 7 demonstrates, stories with significant levels of conflict content dominate in the latter half of the period in contrast to the first four years. One explanation is that real-world conflict between and within institutions actually increased during this period. The years 1977, 1979, 1981, and 1983 included a period of split party control of national government, rising Congressional role in defense and foreign policy and presidential efforts to assert a strong legislative role. However, the same can be said for the previous period. Moreover, the Vietnam War and Watergate sparked significant conflict between the Congress and the presidency. An equally valid argument, then, can be made that conflict in reality did not increase over this time period - 1969-1983.

Increasing coverage of conflict may be a conscious decision on the part of the press. Part of the legacy of Watergate and an adversarial press may be an emphasis on conflict in national governmental stories. Intensified conflict coverage, similar to reduced event description, may be part of a journalistic attempt to exercise more editorial control over the medium. Statements by policymakers must be provided with an antithesis in the story.

The rise in conflict coverage applied for both the presidency and Congress. Conflict in presidency stories appeared to be rising as journalists no longer just reported the president's statements or actions, but provided contrasts with previous statements or actions, or reactions by other policymakers. Conflict within the White House may be a rising theme in the

news content. A similar increase in conflict coverage of Congress suggests that increasingly it is Congress in conflict, not just Congress at work, that warrants coverage by the press.

A Concluding Note

A few general conclusions can be drawn from this study about news coverage of national governmental institutions.

1. The wholistic approach reveals a highly prominent role for the presidency in the news coverage relative to the other two institutions. Well over half of the national institutional stories were devoted to the presidency. There is no balance in the frequency of institutional coverage. The scales have been increasingly tipped in favor of the presidency, not only in terms of frequency of coverage, but also priority of news placement on the print media and spill over into stories of Congress.

The predominant role of the presidency in news coverage may affect public perception of the performance of these two institutions. Public perception, in turn, may affect public expectations concerning the roles of these institutions. With a large slice of the news pie of national government coverage, the presidency possesses the potential for influencing the public agenda, which may well determine the power relationships among national government. According to Schattschneider, "he who determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflict allocates power."³⁰

2. The Supreme Court is an infrequent, but significant factor in the news coverage. The court is provided segregated treatment usually unrelated to the overlapping spheres of activity of the presidency and Congress. The court may have become a more newsworthy subject. So little analysis is available about news media coverage of the Supreme Court. So much more ought to be done.

3. Significant variation across institutions became manifest in analysis of news coverage. The nature of the institution appeared to impact upon the nature of the news coverage of the institution. (The nature of the institution must be conceptually separated from separate administration's efforts to shape the news portrayal. Those efforts have not been included in this study.)

Institutional studies of the press relations with the presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court have hinted at such effects.³¹ But the failure to compare across institutions has resulted in neglect of a comparison of context and a systematic analysis of the relationship between the newsgathering process at these institutions and the actual news content. (One exception is the Grossman and Kumar study.) This study does not perform that task either, but, by analyzing news content, the theoretical underpinnings for future empirical analysis of that proposed relationship can be bolstered.

Table 1

FREQUENCY OF NEWS MEDIA STORIES OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS*

Presidency	Congress	Court	Total
384	234	53	672
(57%)	(35%)	(08%)	(100%)

*The raw data were weighted to account for oversampling of the court stories through stratified sampling.

Table 2

PRIMARY INSTITUTION BY YEAR*

PRIMARY INSTIT.	YEAR							
	1969	1971	1973	1975	1977	1979	1981	1983
CONGRESS	48	46	38	40	27	28	29	23
COURT	05	02	02	10	20	06	08	15
PRESID.	47	53	60	51	53	66	63	63
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	100%	101%*	100%	101%*	100%	100%	100%	101%
	(N=91)	(N=93)	(N=80)	(N=67)	(N=70)	(N=84)	(N=99)	(N=87)

*weighted

*rounding error

TABLE 3
HOUSE AND SENATE STORIES
BY YEAR*

	YEAR							
BODY	1969	1971	1973	1975	1977	1979	1981	1983
HOUSE	29%	29%	13%	59%	41%	34%	29%	71%
SENATE	62	62	63	28	47	58	52	18
BOTH	08	09	24	14	12	08	19	11
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
TOTAL	99%+	100%	100%	101%+	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(N=44)	(N=40)	(N=30)	(N=26)	(N=19)	(N=23)	(N=29)	(N=20)

*weighted

+rounding error

TABLE 4
LEVEL OF POLICY
BY PRIMARY INSTITUTION*

LEVEL OF POLICY	PRIMARY INSTITUTION		
	CONGRESS	COURT	PRESIDENCY
None	23%	14%	24%
Low	09	02	11
Medium	16	20	27
High	53	64	38
	—	—	—
TOTAL	101%+ (N=233)	100% (N=53)	100% (N=384)

*rounding error

*weighted

TABLE 5
LEVEL OF NON-POLICY
BY PRIMARY INSTITUTION*
PRIMARY INSTITUTION

NON-POLICY LEVEL	CONGRESS	COURT	PRESIDENCY
None	59	69	49
Low	06	11	07
Medium	08	09	11
High	26	11	33
	—	—	—
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
	(N=233)	(N=53)	(N=383)

*weighted

TABLE 6
PERSON AND NON-PERSON STORIES
BY PRIMARY INSTITUTION*

PERSON	PRIMARY INSTITUTION		
	CONGRESS	COURT	PRESIDENCY
Non-person story	185(79)	52(97)	187(49)
Person story	49(21)	2(03)	197(52)

*weighted

TABLE 7
LEVEL OF CONFLICT BY YEAR -
ALL INSTITUTIONS, CONGRESS, AND PRESIDENCY*

CONFLICT LEVEL	ALL		CONGRESS		PRESIDENCY	
	69-75	77-83	69-75	77-83	69-75	77-83
NONE/LOW	57%	45%	44%	27%	67%	52%
MED/HIGH	43	55	56	73	33	48
	—	—	—	—	—	—
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	(N=330)	(N=340)	(N=142)	(N=91)	(N=175)	(N=210)

*weighted

NOTES

¹ For samples of literature on news media coverage of crises, see Bradley S. Greenberg and Edwin B. Parker, The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public: Social Communication in Crisis (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1965); Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, The Battle for Public Opinion: The President, the Press, and the Polls During Watergate (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and Sharon M. Friedman, "Blueprint for Breakdown: Three Mile Island and the Media Before the Accident," Journal of Communication 31 (Spring 1981): 116-128. Foreign affairs news content studies include William C. Adams, Television Coverage of the Middle East (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1981); Edward W. Said, Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World (New York: Pantheon, 1981); and William C. Adams, Television Coverage of International Affairs (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1982).

² Michael B. Grossman and Martha Joynt Kumar, Portraying the President (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), chapter ten.

³ G. Cleveland Wilhoit and Kenneth S. Sherill, "Wire Service Visibility of U.S. Senators," Journalism Quarterly 45 (Spring 1968): 42-48.

⁴ David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, News Media Coverage of U.S. Senators in Four Congresses (Lexington, Ky.: Association for Education in Journalism, 1980).

⁵ Michael J. Robinson and Kevin R. Appel, "Network News Coverage of Congress," Political Science Quarterly 94 (Fall 1979): 407-418.

⁶ Charles M. Tidmarch and John J. Pitney, Jr., "Covering Congress," Polity 17 (Spring 1985): 463-483.

⁷ Ibid. See also Robinson and Appel, pp. 407-418.

⁸ Stephen Hess, The Washington Reporters (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1981), p. 104.

⁹ Robinson and Appel, pp. 407-418.

¹⁰ Tidmarch and Pitney, pp. 463-483.

¹¹ Norman J. Ornstein and Michael J. Robinson, "Television's Coverage of Congress," TV Guide, 11 January 1986, pp. 4-11.

¹² David W. Leslie, "The Supreme Court in the Media: A Content Analysis," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Portland, Oregon, 15 April 1976.

¹³ David Ericson, "Newspaper Coverage of the Supreme Court," Journalism Quarterly 54 (Autumn 1977): 605-607.

¹⁴ Michael Solimine, "Newsmagazine Coverage of the Supreme Court," Journalism Quarterly 57 (Winter 1980): 661-663.

¹⁵ See Thomas E. Patterson, The Mass Media Election (New York: Praeger, 1980), chapter four; and Doris A. Graber, Mass Media and American Politics (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1984), pp. 200-202.

¹⁶ Michael J. Robinson and Margaret Sheehan, Over the Wire and on TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1983), p. 57.

¹⁷ V.O. Key, Public Opinion and American Democracy (New York: Knopf, 1961), p. 54.

¹⁸ James Buckalew, "News Elements and Selection by Television News Editors," Journal of Broadcasting 14 (Winter 69-70): 47-54; Daniel Riffe and Eugene F. Shaw, "Conflict and Consonance: Coverage of the Third World in Two U.S. Papers," Journalism Quarterly 59 (Winter 1982): 617-626; David L. Paletz and Martha Elson, "Television Coverage of Presidential Nominating Conventions: Now You See It, Now You Don't," Political Science Quarterly 91 (Spring 1976): 109-131; and David W. Leslie, "The Supreme Court in the Media: A Content Analysis," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Portland, Oregon, 15 April 1976, p. 23.

¹⁹ Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr., "Presidential News: The Expanding Public Image," Journalism Quarterly 36 (Summer 1959): 275-283.

²⁰ Alan Baluthis, "Congress, the Presidency, and the Press: The Expanding Presidential Image," Presidential Studies Quarterly 7 (Fall 1977): 244-251.

²¹ David L. Grey, The Supreme Court and the Mass Media (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 51.

²² William L. Rivers, The Other Government: Power & the Washington Media (New York: Universe Books, 1982), p. 88).

²³ Charles Tidmarch and John J. Pitney, Jr., "Covering Congress," Polity 17 (Spring 1985): 463-483.

²⁴ Nelson W. Polsby, "Goodbye to the Inner Club," in Congressional Behavior, ed. Polsby (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 109.

²⁵ David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, News Media Coverage of U.S. Senators in Four Congresses (Lexington, Ky.: Association for Education in Journalism, 1980).

²⁶ Michael J. Robinson, "Three Faces of Congressional Media," in The New Congress, eds. Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), pp. 55-96. See also Michael J. Robinson and Kevin R. Appel, "Network News Coverage of Congress," Political Science Quarterly 94 (Fall 1979): 407-418.

²⁷ Michael B. Grossman and Martha Joynt Kumar, Portraying the President (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University press, 1981), p. 263.

¹⁸ "President's News Conference on Resignation of Chief Justice," New York Times, 18 June 1986.

¹⁹ George Comstock, "Social and Cultural Impact of the Mass Media," in What's News: The Media in American Society, ed. Elie Abel (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1981), pp. 233-253.

²⁰ E.E. Schattschneider, The Semi-Sovereign People (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960), p. 68.

²¹ See Grossman and Kumar, Portraying the President; and Grey, The Supreme Court.